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AUTHOR	McClellan, Diane E.; Katz, Lilian G.
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ABSTRACT

During the past two decades, a convincing body of evidence has accumulated to indicate that unless children achieve minimal social competence by about the age of 6 years, they have a high probability of being at risk into adulthood in several ways. This digest presents a checklist of attributes of child social behavior that teachers are encouraged to examine every 3 or 4 months. The checklist is intended as one of variety of ways the social well-being of children can be assessed. The attributes indicate adequate social growth if they characterize the child's "usual" behavior. The attributes include individual characteristics, such as positive mood and capacities for empathy and humor; general social skills, such as gaining access to groups at play and work, taking turns fairly and easily, and not drawing inappropriate attention; and peer relationship attributes, such as acceptance rather than neglect or rejection by peers. The digest includes suggestions for teachers for observing and monitoring interactions and cautions awareness of what is appropriate and effective behavior for individual cultures. Contains 14 references. (HTH)

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University of Illinois • 51 Gerty Drive • Champaign, IL 61820-7469
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Assessing Young Children's Social Competence

Diane E. McClellan and Lilian G. Katz

During the past two decades, a convincing body of evidence has accumulated to indicate that unless children achieve minimal social competence by about the age of 6 years, they have a high probability of being at risk into adulthood in several ways (Ladd, 2000; Parker & Asher, 1987). Recent research (Hartup & Moore, 1990; Kinsey, 2000; Ladd & Profilet, 1996; McClellan & Kinsey, 1999; Parker & Asher, 1987; Rogoff, 1990) suggests that a child's long-term social and emotional adaptation, academic and cognitive development, and citizenship are enhanced by frequent opportunities to strengthen social competence during childhood.

Hartup (1992) notes that peer relationships in particular contribute a great deal to both social and cognitive development and to the effectiveness with which we function as adults. He states that "the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not school grades, and not classroom behavior, but rather, the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children, and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously at risk" (Hartup, 1992, p. 1). The risks are many: poor mental health, dropping out of school, low achievement and other school difficulties, and poor employment history (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

Because social development begins at birth and progresses rapidly during the preschool years, it is clear that early childhood programs should include regular opportunities for spontaneous child-initiated social play. Berk and Winsler (1995) suggest that it is through symbolic/pretend play that young children are most likely to develop both socially and intellectually. Thus, periodic assessment of children's progress in the acquisition of social competence is appropriate.

The set of items presented below is based on research on elements of social competence in young children and on studies in which the behavior of well-liked children has been compared with that of less-liked children (Katz & McClellan, 1997; Ladd & Profilet, 1996; McClellan & Kinsey, 1999).

The Social Attributes Checklist

The checklist provided in this Digest includes attributes of a child's social behavior that teachers are encouraged to examine every three or four months. Consultations with parents and other caregivers help to provide a validity check. In using the checklist, teachers are advised to note whether the attributes are typical of the child. Any child can have a few really bad days, for a variety of reasons; if assessments are to be reasonably reliable, judgments of the overall pattern of functioning over a period of at least three or four weeks are required. The checklist is intended as one of a variety of ways the social well-being of children can be assessed.

How children act toward and are treated by their classmates (cooperatively or aggressively, helpfully or demandingly, etc.) appears to have a substantial impact on the relationships they develop (Ladd, 2000). However, healthy social development does not require that a child be a "social butterfly." The most important index to note is the quality rather than the quantity of a child's friendships. Children (even rejected children) who develop a close friend increase the degree to which they feel positively about school over time (Ladd, 1999). There is evidence (Rothbart & Bates, 1998; Kagan, 1992) that some children are simply more shy or more inhibited than others, and it may be counterproductive to push such children into social relations that make them uncomfortable (Katz & McClellan, 1997). Furthermore, unless that shyness is severe enough to prevent a child from enjoying most of the "good things of life," such as birthday parties, picnics, and family outings, it is reasonable to assume that, when handled sensitively, the shyness will be spontaneously outgrown.

Many of the attributes listed in the checklist below indicate adequate social growth if they characterize the child's *usual* behavior. This qualifier is included to ensure that occasional fluctuations do not lead to over-interpretation of children's temporary difficulties. On the basis of frequent direct contact with the child, observation in a variety of situations, and information obtained from parents and other caregivers, a teacher or caregiver can use the checklist as an informal research-based means of assessing each child's social and emotional well-being. It is intended to provide a guideline for teachers and parents and is based on several teacher rating scales (all demonstrating high internal reliability) used by researchers to measure children's social behavior. Most of these scales (Ladd, 2000; Ladd & Profilet, 1996; McClellan & Kinsey, 1999) have also been replicated on more than one occasion and have demonstrated high reliability over time.

Teachers can observe and monitor interactions among children and let children who rarely have difficulties attempt to solve conflicts by themselves before intervening. If a child appears to be doing well on most of the attributes and characteristics in the checklist, then it is reasonable to assume that occasional social difficulties will be outgrown without intervention. It is also reasonable to assume that children will strengthen their social skills, confidence, and independence by being entrusted to solve their social difficulties without adult assistance. However, if a child seems to be doing poorly on many of the items listed, the responsible adults can implement strategies that will help the child to overcome and outgrow the social difficulties. The

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checklist is not a prescription for "correct social behavior"; rather it is an aid to help teachers observe, understand, and support children as they grow in social skillfulness. If a child seems to be doing poorly on many of the items on the list, strategies can be implemented to help the child to establish more satisfying relationships with other children (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

Children's current and long-term social-emotional development, as well as cognitive and academic (Kinsey, 2000) development, are clearly affected by the child's social experiences with peers and adults. It is important to keep in mind that children vary in social behavior for a variety of reasons. Research indicates that children have distinct personalities and temperaments from birth (Rothbart & Bates, 1998; Kagan, 1992). In addition, nuclear and extended family relationships and cultural contexts also affect social behavior. What is appropriate or effective social behavior in one culture may not be in another. Many children thus may need help in bridging their differences and in finding ways to learn from and enjoy the company of one another. Teachers have a responsibility to be proactive in creating a classroom community that accepts and supports all children.

The Social Attributes Checklist

I. Individual Attributes

The child:

1. Is **usually** in a positive mood.
2. Is not **excessively** dependent on adults.
3. **Usually** comes to the program willingly.
4. **Usually** copes with rebuffs adequately.
5. Shows the capacity to empathize.
6. Has positive relationships with one or two peers; shows the capacity to really care about them and miss them if they are absent.
7. Displays the capacity for humor.
8. Does not seem to be acutely lonely.

II. Social Skills Attributes

The child **usually**:

1. Approaches others positively.
2. Expresses wishes and preferences clearly; gives reasons for actions and positions.
3. Asserts own rights and needs appropriately.
4. Is not easily intimidated by bullies.
5. Expresses frustrations and anger effectively and without escalating disagreements or harming others.
6. Gains access to ongoing groups at play and work.
7. Enters ongoing discussion on the subject; makes relevant contributions to ongoing activities.
8. Takes turns fairly easily.
9. Shows interest in others; exchanges information with and requests information from others appropriately.
10. Negotiates and compromises with others appropriately.
11. Does not draw inappropriate attention to self.
12. Accepts and enjoys peers and adults of ethnic groups other than his or her own.
13. Interacts nonverbally with other children with smiles, waves, nods, etc.

III. Peer Relationship Attributes

The child:

1. Is **usually** accepted versus neglected or rejected by other children.
2. Is **sometimes** invited by other children to join them in play, friendship, and work.
3. Is named by other children as someone they are friends with or like to play and work with.

For More Information

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